

Iraqi court sentences Tareq Aziz to death

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's supreme criminal court sentenced former deputy prime minister Tareq Aziz to death on Tuesday, the first death sentence handed down against the long-time international face of the Saddam Hussein regime.

"The supreme criminal court issued an execution order against Tareq Aziz for his role in eliminating religious parties," state television reported.

It said that the court also ordered death sentences against two other top Saddam lieutenants, former interior minister Saadoun Shaker and Abid Hamoud, the executed dictator's secretary.

All three were sentenced for their role in a crackdown on Shias, which followed a 1982 assassination attempt against Saddam in Dujail, a mainly Shia town north of Baghdad, the court's spokesman Mohammed Abdul Saheb said.

"The order was for the crackdown on religious parties which took place in the 1980s," Abdul Saheb told AFP.

There was another bigger crackdown against Iraq's Shia majority community following a 1991 uprising against Saddam.

By law, the death sentences have to be con-

firmed by the presidential council before being carried out.

Aziz's Jordan-based son Ziad told AFP that the death sentence against his father proved the revelations made about the Iraqi state by the whistleblower website WikiLeaks.

"The decision was an act of revenge against anybody and anything related to the past," he said.

"It proves the credibility of the information published by WikiLeaks... This verdict is a disgrace," said Ziad, who has lived in Amman with his family since 2003.

WikiLeaks published 391,832 classified US military documents on Iraq on Friday which its founder Julian Assange said showed the war was "a bloodbath on every corner" with numerous reports of abuse of detainees by Iraqi forces, often supported by medical evidence.

"My father had nothing to do with religious parties," Ziad said, referring to the court verdict.

"He himself was a victim of a religious party, Al-Dawa," currently led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Ziad was referring to a grenade attack against his father in a university in Baghdad in April 1980 as he delivered a speech. He was wounded in the attack.



Tareq Aziz

India agrees to supply of rare earths for Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Tokyo said yesterday that India has agreed to provide a stable supply of rare earth minerals to Japan as the high-tech economy looks to diversify sources after a spat with key provider China.

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who wound up his three-day visit to Japan on Tuesday, made the pledge during talks with the Japanese side on Monday, industry minister Akihiro Ohata said at a news conference.

"Prime Minister Singh told us that he will cooperate in long-term supply of rare earth minerals," Ohata said, according to a trade ministry official.

On Monday, Singh met Prime Minister Naoto Kan, Ohata and other Japanese officials and agreed to broadly cooperate in rare earth deals.

In a statement, the premiers "decided to explore the possibility of bilateral cooperation in development, recycling and reuse of rare earths and rare metals and in research and development of their industrial substitutes."

Iran acknowledges assistance for Afghans

Tehran's cash to Kabul worries US

AFP, BBC ONLINE, Kabul

Iran acknowledged yesterday giving "assistance" to Afghanistan after President Hamid Karzai admitted receiving bags of cash from Tehran, sparking US concerns about its arch-foe's expanding influence.

Karzai insisted at a news conference in Kabul on Monday that the payments to his chief of staff -- sometimes as much as 700,000 euros (980,000 dollars) at a time -- were transparent handouts for his presidential office.

The US has voiced concern about Iran's "negative influence" on Afghanistan, after Afghan President Hamid Karzai admitted receiving cash from Tehran.

White House spokesman Bill Burton urged Iran to play a more positive role.

Karzai has denied any wrongdoing, saying the cash was part of a "transparent" process to help to run the president's office.

He was responding to a report that Iran had been passing bags stuffed full of cash to his aides.

Burton told reporters that the American people and the global community had "every reason" to be concerned about Iran trying to have a "negative influence" on Afghanistan.

The White House spokesman added that Barack Obama's administration had seen the reports about Iran's payments, but declined to

give any further details.

His comments come just hours after Karzai admitted that his chief of staff, Umar Daudzai, had received cash.

"The government of Iran has been assisting us with five or six or seven hundred thousand euros once or twice every year, that is an official aid," he said.

He said he had discussed the issue with former US President George W. Bush.

"This is nothing hidden. We are grateful for the Iranian help in this regard. The United States is doing the same thing, they're providing cash to some of our offices."

The story came to light in a New York Times report, which claimed that a large bag of euro notes had been passed to Daudzai at the end of an official visit to Iran by Karzai.

The report quoted officials as saying a stream of payments totalling millions of dollars had been used to secure their loyalty of Afghan politicians, tribal elders and even Taliban commanders.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a neighbouring government, is deeply concerned about Afghanistan's stability, and has given much assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan," foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said when asked to comment on Karzai's announcement.

Indonesia's Mount Merapi volcano erupts

AFP, Yogyakarta

Indonesia's Mount Merapi erupted three times yesterday, causing thousands to flee and claiming the life of a three-month-old baby girl as it emitted searing clouds and volcanic ash.

Before the latest eruption people living in the shadow of Indonesia's most active volcano had been warned to evacuate or risk being killed. "We heard three explosions around 6:00 pm (1100 GMT) spewing volcanic material as high as 1.5 kilometres and sending heat clouds down the slopes," government volcanologist Surono told AFP.

A doctor at Muntlilan hospital, Sasongko, told MetroTV: "The baby had severe breathing difficulties from inhaling volcanic materials and we could not help her."

She was the first reported death from the volcano in central Java, around 25 kilometres (15 miles) north of the cultural capital of Yogyakarta.



First Lady Michelle Obama (L) addresses potential donors as Jill Biden (R), wife of US Vice President Joe Biden, and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, (C) look on at a Democratic congressional campaign committee-sponsored fundraising dinner in San Francisco on Monday.

FORBES DECLARES MJ top-earning dead celebrity

REUTERS LIFE, New York

Michael Jackson's sudden death sparked an outpouring of grief around the world, but fans also opened their wallets to make him this year's top-earning dead celebrity with \$275 million, Forbes said on Monday.

Jackson raked in more than the combined total of the other 12 celebrities on the list, Forbes magazine said. He was ranked third on last year's list with \$90 million.

Elvis Presley came in second, earning \$60 million from admissions to his former home, Graceland, which is now a museum and tourist attraction in Memphis, Tennessee, a Cirque de Soleil show and more than 200 licensing and merchandise deals.

"Jackson's spot atop our top earning dead celebrities

list should come as no surprise given the renewed fan interest in music, videos and all things Michael Jackson," said Forbes writer Lacey Rose.

Jackson was 50 when he died in his Los Angeles home on June 25 last year, shortly before a planned series of comeback concerts in London. The singer left behind three children and a debt of \$500 million.

But his estate has generated millions since his death, mostly through record sales, the "This Is It" concert movie, licensing rights, deals to release new albums and a Cirque du Soleil stage show in Las Vegas.



"Thanks to a lucrative catalog, hit film and album sales, the late king of pop earned more in the last year than Lady Gaga, Madonna and Jay-Z, combined," said Rose.

Jackson's physician, Dr. Conrad Murray, is awaiting trial on a charge that he is responsible for the singer's death by administering a powerful anaesthetic to help him sleep.

Lanka appeals for death-row maid in KSA

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has appealed for the king of Saudi Arabia to spare the life of a Sri Lankan housemaid convicted of killing an infant, his office said yesterday.

Rizana Nafeek, who was working in the Middle Eastern country, was found guilty of killing a four-month-old baby boy in her care in 2005.

The Saudi Supreme Court recently rejected an appeal against the verdict by the maid's family.

"President Mahinda Rajapakse wrote to King Abdullah ... of Saudi Arabia seeking clemency for Sri Lankan maid Rizana Nafeek," his office said in a statement.

Nafeek, who was 17 at that time, has maintained that the death of the infant was an accident.

She originally confessed to killing the baby, but later retracted her statement saying it had been made under duress.

Nobel laureate's brothers offer to accept prize

AFP, AP, Beijing

The brothers of jailed Nobel peace laureate Liu Xiaobo are willing to accept the prize on his behalf in Norway later this year if his wife is unable to attend, a rights group said yesterday.

Liu Xiaoguang and Liu Xiaoxuan have both expressed their willingness to represent their brother at the award ceremony in Oslo on December 10, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy said.

Liu, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison last December on subversion charges after co-authoring a manifesto calling for political reform in China, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on October 8 -- enraging China's rulers.

The brothers called on Group of 20 leaders to exert pressure on Chinese President Hu Jintao to release Liu when they gather for a summit in South Korea next month, the Information Centre said in a statement.

Meanwhile, the wife of jailed Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo has invited dozens of Chinese activists and luminaries to her to the Nobel award ceremony in Oslo on her behalf because mainland authorities are likely to block her from going.

Liu Xia said in an open letter posted online

that she believed her husband would want his friends "to attend this historic ceremony and to share the glory."

Currently unreachable because she is under house arrest, Liu Xia said in the letter that the likelihood of her or her jailed husband being allowed to go to Norway for the Dec 10 event was slim.

Liu Xia's invitation letter is dated Oct 20 but was not posted online until Sunday. Yang Jianli, an exiled Chinese democracy activist and close friend of the couple, confirmed Tuesday from his home in Brookline, Massachusetts, that the letter was authentic and said Liu Xia asked him to help coordinate the event.

"This is a very rare opportunity for so many people to converge to the same place with the same goal," Yang said. "I think I have to make good use of this opportunity to make it a moment of unifying and looking to the future."

The letter lists 143 people, many of them well-known Chinese activists such as Ding Zilin, whose teenage son was killed during the military crackdown against pro-democracy protests around Tiananmen Square in 1989, and Li Rui, the former secretary to revolutionary leader Mao Zedong and an outspoken supporter of democratic reform.

Nepal's 13th bid fails to elect PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament failed Tuesday in its 13th bid to elect a new prime minister, meaning the impoverished Himalayan nation has been without a functioning government for almost four months.

Nepal has been stuck in a series of futile elections, with no candidate able to secure the necessary absolute majority, since caretaker prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal resigned from his post on June 30.

He stepped down under intense pressure from the opposition Maoist party, who have been calling for a consensus government.

The Maoists, who fought a decade-long civil war against the state before transforming themselves into a political party and winning 2008 elections, hold the largest number of seats in parliament but not enough to govern alone.

Suu Kyi sidelined for polls

AP, Bangkok

On the morning of Myanmar's first election in 20 years, the woman who has come to symbolize the struggle for democracy in her country will rise at 4 am to meditate.

Then she will switch on her four short-wave radios to follow the event from inside the crumbling lakefront villa that is her home and prison.

The popular and charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi is right where the ruling military junta wants her: locked away under house arrest. She is barred from running in the Nov 7 election. Her political party has been dissolved, removing the only viable opposition in the country formerly known as Burma.

The results of the vote appear to be a foregone conclusion. The military, which has run Myanmar since 1962, is expected to continue to do so through a proxy party. Its so-called "roadmap to democracy" is widely seen at home and abroad as a sham to extend military rule with a civilian facade.

Suu Kyi (pronounced Sue-Chee) carried her party to a landslide win in Myanmar's last election in 1990. The ruling generals ignored the results and have kept the Nobel Peace Prize winner locked up on-and-off ever since.

This time, the junta is not taking any chances. The 65-year-old Suu Kyi has been politically neutralized, reduced to a mere observer.

But her story may have a sequel. Her detention expires on Nov. 13, a few days after the election, and many analysts believe Suu Kyi will be granted limited freedom as an olive branch to the international community.

"The military has effectively marginalized Aung San Suu Kyi, because she cannot go out and campaign against the military's election," said Muang Zarni, an exiled dissident and Myanmar research fellow at the London School of Economics. "So in that sense, the military has won. But political struggles are not 100-meter sprints."

"As long as Aung San Suu Kyi walks the streets of Burmese cities, she can mobilize public opinion against the regime," Zarni said. "They are afraid of her popular appeal. And when you (combine) Aung San Suu Kyi and massive discontent, you've got a very explosive situation."

It is largely because of Suu Kyi that Myanmar is not forgotten.

Often compared to Nelson Mandela and Gandhi, the petite and poised Suu Kyi has inspired songs by the rock groups U2 and REM. On her birthdays, Hollywood stars such as George Clooney have joined world leaders and global protests in calls for her freedom.

"She is our beacon of hope. She stands for freedom and democracy in Myanmar," said Moe Moe, a 44-year-old beauty salon owner, one of a dozen people interviewed about the elections in Yangon, the nation's teeming main city.

Arundhati Roy faces arrest over Kashmir remark

GUARDIAN ONLINE

The Booker prize-winning novelist and human rights campaigner Arundhati Roy is facing the threat of arrest after claiming that the disputed territory of Kashmir is not an integral part of India.

India's home ministry is reported to have told police in Delhi that a case of sedition may be registered against Roy and the Kashmiri separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani for remarks they made at the weekend.

Under Section 124A of the Indian penal code, those convicted of sedition face punishments ranging from a fine to life imprisonment.

Roy who won the Booker in 1997 for *The God of Small Things* is a controversial figure in India for her championing of politically sensitive causes. She has divided opinion by speaking out in support of the Naxalite insurgency and for casting doubt on Pakistan's involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

But in a statement the 48-year-old author, who is currently in Srinagar, Kashmir, refused to backtrack. "I said what millions of people here say every day. I said what I, as

Arundhati Roy faces arrest over Kashmir remark as well as other commentators, have written and said for years. Anybody who cares to read the transcripts of my speeches will see that they were fundamentally a call for justice.

"I spoke about justice for the people of Kashmir who live under one of the most brutal military occupations in the world; for Kashmiri Pandits who live out the tragedy of having been driven out of their homeland; for Dalit soldiers killed in Kashmir whose graves I visited on garbage heaps in their villages in Cuddalore; for the Indian poor who pay the price of this occupation in material ways and who are now learning to live in the terror of what is becoming a police state."



Chinese boy survives 20-story fall from window

AP, Beijing

A 10-year-old Chinese boy has survived falling 20 stories from an apartment window and landing on a parked car.

A doctor at the People's Hospital of Guizhou in southern China says the boy suffered skull fractures and bleeding on the brain and remains under close observation.

The state-run Xinhua News Agency says the boy fell from the open apartment window Monday morning and his fall shattered the car's back window.

The doctor surnamed Han in the neurosurgery department says it is a miracle the boy survived.



A Pakistani soldier guards a military helicopter at the Kalaya military base, Orakzai tribal agency, Pakistan yesterday. The Pakistani military claimed to have cleared 90pc of the Orakzai district of insurgents after an offensive involving around 5,000 army soldiers and frontier corps, which was launched on March 24, 2010.